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## Bellflower adult classes facing the ax

**School board asked to close the program; students hurt and frustrated.****By Pamela Hale-Burns, Staff Writer**

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Bellflower Unified school board on Thursday will consider cutting the entire adult ed/continuing education program. (Brittany Murray / Staff Photographer)

BELLFLOWER - Ana Ruiz, a student pursuing a cosmetology career at Bellflower Adult School, was optimistic about starting a new job to help support her family.

Now the 43-year-old fears the school will close before she makes it to graduation day, which is only seven months away.

Bellflower Unified School District Superintendent Brian Jacobs is asking the school board at Thursday's meeting to eliminate the Adult School program as part of several service cuts.

"I'm upset and I'm hurt that they would even do this right now with all these cuts - with people losing jobs," Ruiz said. "How fair is that for us who are trying to do something to get jobs?"

According to a report with the board's meeting agenda, the move is "in the best interest of the district." The cuts would eliminate the equivalent of 21 full-time positions districtwide, including seven in the Adult School program, the report says.

The report doesn't say why the cuts are recommended, how much money they will save or whether Bellflower Unified even has a budget deficit. Jacobs refused multiple interview requests Tuesday and Wednesday.

However, Bellflower Unified, like most California school districts, has had ongoing budget problems.

Bellflower has an annual budget of roughly \$100 million and serves 14,000 students in Bellflower and portions of Lakewood and Cerritos.

Over the past few years, the district has taken several cost-cutting measures to help balance its budget, such as furloughs and increasing class sizes.

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With statewide budget woes and the uncertainty of future funding for education, school districts across the state

are being forced to make difficult financial decisions.

The California Department of Education in its first interim status report for the 2011-2012 school year listed 120 school districts in danger of not meeting their financial obligations for this fiscal year and the next two years. Bellflower made the list in 2011 but wasn't on the most recent list released in February.

Students and teachers at the Bellflower Adult School say they have heard that the district may shutter the program because of budget shortfalls.

"I understand they are deciding to close all the adult education programs, not just cosmetology, but the other adult academic programs they have in place," said an Adult School instructor who spoke on the condition of anonymity. "We were told it was due to our state's mismanagement of funds and that this is something they need to do to get bigger and better funds together for (kindergarten) through (12th grade)."



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Several students, who are set to graduate this year and who have possible jobs waiting for them, will be significantly affected by the closure, said the instructor.

"I think (school district officials) are giving us the run around because there are other ways they can pare down," said the instructor. "These are the young adults of today who are either coming to learn a new skill or those who have been laid off due to the state's economic downfall, and (district officials) are being made to cater to K through 12."

As an older adult who has worked in several different industries, Ruiz just wants to make it to graduation, she said.

"I was able to save up enough to put down to come here to do something I enjoy, because everywhere else was so expensive. But now, they are shutting us out," she said. "Don't close our doors. Wait until we graduate. Don't just throw us out in the street."

School district officials need to look at the long term, the instructor said.

"I would hope they would find it feasible to leave us open at least through January to allow all these students to graduate and take their state board exam and start earning their living," she said.

Brandi Innamorato, 20, who is scheduled to graduate in June, is worried not only about not being able to graduate, but also about whether she will be reimbursed for her tuition if the school closes before she has finished.

"I would have to find a new school to go to because I probably would not graduate on time," she said. "I don't even know if I should make my last payment, because if it closes down and I put money in, they are going to have to reimburse me. It's just a big hassle for nothing."

In addition to cosmetology, Bellflower Adult School offers courses such as GED classes, esthetician training and photography.

No matter what happens, students and teachers plan to stand and fight to the end, said Innamorato.

"If we're all going down, we're not going down easy," she said.

According to the instructor, who is also a member of the Bellflower Teacher's Association, the Adult School program's funds had been guaranteed until 2015, but now, "officials need to sweep \$2 million from under us."

The president of the Bellflower Teacher's Association couldn't be reached for comment Wednesday.

"My students are going to suffer tremendously," the instructor said. "If this goes down in June, there will be a lot of students here who will not be able to continue their education. They've already invested into their local education and they are being denied."

The board meeting will be held at 7:30p.m. Thursday at the District Administration Building, 16703 S. Clark Ave.

Staff Writer Kelly Puente contributed to this report.

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